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SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS CALL ON U/S DOBRIANSKY FOR MORE US SUPPORT

1. Summary: On February 24, Undersecretary for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, explored at a roundtable with Yemeni NGOs areas where the U.S. can support Yemen's nascent civil society. Representatives from forty NGOs raised concerns over human rights abuses, women's access to political and economic power, and declining press freedom in Yemen. U/S applauded the diversity and experience of Yemen's NGOs and encouraged them to continue sharing their ideas with the U.S. mission in Sanaa. Highlighting the development opportunities available to Yemen through the MCC process, U/S stressed that to qualify for increased funding, Yemen must take concrete action to fight crime and corruption. Acknowledging concerns over the imprisonment of opposition journalist Khaiwani, U/S said she hoped to see forward movement on freedom of the press in Yemen. End summary.

2. Presidential Counselor, Prime Minister Dr. Abdul Karim al-Iryani, co-chaired the Civil Society Roundtable in his role as Chairman of Cultural Bridges Forum, an organization designed to enhance dialogue between donors and Yemeni civil society organizations. Iryani launched the forum by encouraging broader cooperation among NGOs on areas of common interest. In her opening remarks, U/S said that Yemen was her only stop on this visit, and that she came to Sanaa especially to "to explore where Yemen is going in the area of democracy." She elicited views from Yemen NGO and civil society leaders on press freedom, human rights and women's political participation. Stressing she was here to listen, U/S asked the NGO representatives to share their strategies to influence the ROYG, as well as for their views on how best to combat Yemen's pervasive corruption.

Call For True Multi-Party Rule

3. Yemen Institute for Democratic Development Director Ahmed Sufi outlined the brief history of Yemen's civil society, noting that in 1994 there were only a handful of NGOs operating in Yemen. Sufi described his latest project to expand democratic education in schools, and requested that the USG make democratic education and economic development central to its activities in Yemen. Political Development Forum, Chief Ali Saif Hasan, repeated visiting World Bank President James Wolfenson's warnings about the need for political reform saying, "we cannot rely on one-party government to face the challenges ahead." Hasan asked for USG assistance in publishing an annual report on transparency and accountability to "overcome the exaggeration" by the ROYG of Yemen's democratic progress.

Human Rights and Security

4. Mohammed Ala'o, prominent human rights attorney and President of the National organization for Defending Rights and Freedoms (HOOD) pointed to several post-9/11 human rights abuses in Yemen including "thousands of arrests." He claimed that dozens of Yemenis remain in prison without access to lawyers and due process. Describing incidents of torture, Ala'o criticized the lack of judicial independence in Yemen, specifically that President Saleh is head of the Supreme Judicial Council. Ala'o closed by complaining that Abu Ghraib tarnished the image of the U.S. as the leading supporter for human rights. Calling the Abu Gharib incident an egregious abuse of human rights, U/S stressed that there was a process in the U.S. to bring the violators to justice. U/S asked that participants share information with the mission in order to enhance the U.S. understanding of the situation in Yemen.

MCC: Transparency and Accountability

5. Turning to Yemen's threshold status in the Millennium Challenge Account, U/S stressed that Yemen has an opportunity to dramatically increase USG development assistance, but accessing MCA funds would require serious progress in combating corruption. U/S encouraged NGOs to work with the U.S. Embassy on transparency and accountability issues.

Expanding Women's Participation Across Yemeni Society

16. Citing the 2003 Arab Human Development Report, U/S said expanding the role for women in politics and the economy is critical for development. She pointed to U.S. support for democratic institutions through the National Democratic Institute (NDI), specifically their work to engage women in the political process.

17. Dr. Bilqis Abu Osbu, Al-Jazeera Women's Rights Center Director, asserted that the political role of women is declining in Yemen as demonstrated by the drop in female held seats from two in 1997 to one in 2001. After protracted discussion, women's groups have agreed to seek quotas, explained Osbu, who also announced that the GPC ruling party endorsed a 20 percent quota for women in Parliament and promised legal changes to codify women's rights (Note: Post,s understanding is that the GPC has endorsed 10 percent quota. End note).

18. Social Organization for Family Development Chief, Basma al-Qubati, referred to the ROYG's plan to be a developed country in 2025 and yet, she said, the role of human rights and NGOs is neglected by government planners. Qubati asked that an NGO and Civil Society empowerment strategy be developed to unite and organize their efforts. Dr. Qaderi, from the Yemen's Women Union, said that her organization focused on the eradication of illiteracy to allow women multiple opportunities for economic and political expression. U/S replied that the U.S. could partner in many areas such as literacy, micro-finance, and political involvement of women.

Press Freedom -- Still a Concern

19. Female Media Forum President and journalist, Rahma al-Hujera, thanked "terrorism" for bringing U.S. and international attention to the issue of reform, particularly in the areas of women, democracy and development. Noting that the mission of her organization is to highlight gender disparity in the media, Hujera raised declining freedom of speech in Yemen, citing the recent string of journalist prosecutions and newspaper closures. U/S affirmed that the U.S. was indeed concerned about deteriorating press freedoms in Yemen and that she had raised the case of imprisoned opposition journalist Khaiwani in her meetings with ROYG officials. Characterizing the issue, "as something we would like to see movement on," U/S said Yemen has taken a number of positive steps in democratization, but that a regression in press freedom would hurt the country's image internationally.

110. Comment: Yemen's civil society participants demonstrated a true willingness to discuss difficult issues openly and honestly. Many clearly enjoyed the opportunity to speak and exchange ideas with a high-level USG official. The true test for Yemen civil society, however, will be whether or not they can move to the next step, from open and honest discussion to mobilizing to influence ROYG decision-making and become a partner of the government in reform. While Yemen's NGOs are diverse and active, most still lack the capacity and capability to affect change. End comment.

11. Under Secretary Dobriansky did not have an opportunity to clear on this message.
Krajeski